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There's Nothing Underhanded About Liberation: A Reevaluation of the Trickster Figure

by Luisa Ossa

In his article "*Changó, el gran putas* as Liberation Literature," Ian Smart describes Manuel Zapata Olivella's novel *Changó el gran putas* as one based in African culture and principles, and furthermore, that the novel works towards gaining the validation of this culture and its principles. According to Smart, the novel's foundation in African culture and principles is particularly important because it is this foundation that greatly aids to it qualifying as 'liberation literature.' He designates as 'liberation literature' that which Franz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* called 'a fighting literature,' a 'revolutionary literature.'[1] According to Smart, *Changó*:

> speaks about liberation. More importantly, built on demonstrably African aesthetic principles, it affirms the existence of a peculiar and systematic African culture; it acts out the liberation about which it speaks. (15)

In his discussion of *Changó* as liberation literature Smart further states that the theme of liberation within the novel is discussed through various principal characters whose primary role is to free people of African descent from oppression. He believes that these characters, who play the role of liberators, are "tricksters" who use "trickery" to achieve their goals. According to Smart, the trickster, "for an oppressed people is essentially a liberator" (21). He further theorizes that the use of trickery is necessary for the empowerment of the oppressed and he believes that the manner in which *Changó* discusses the African-American struggle for liberation supports this theory. Smart's previous definition of the trickster creates the following pertinent questions: How does Smart define "trickery"? Is trickery for Smart the practice of deception, of cheating, or does Smart simply view trickery as tactics? It is this ambiguity that makes Smart's categorization problematic.

Before entering further into a specific discussion of Smart's usage of the trickster figure, I believe a brief general discussion of the figure is useful. The amphibology of Smart's trickster is not surprising, because there seems to be a great deal of ambiguity around what exactly constitutes a trickster. Use of the category is first complicated by its varied definitions. Elizabeth Ammons and Robert Pelton both view the trickster as a figure that exists globally in literature. However, both agree that a trickster may differ greatly from culture to culture. Despite the numerous cultural variations of the trickster, in her book *Tricksterism in Turn of the Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective* Ammons provides the following general definition of tricksterism: "The essence of the tricksterism is change, contradiction, adaptation, surprise" (xii). This definition, however, is quite vague and leaves open the possibility of the categorization of exceptionally different characters with little or nothing in common under the category of trickster.

In his book, *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*, Pelton discusses the origins of the trickster category and credits Daniel Brinton as being the first to utilize the term to designate this literary figure. According to Pelton:

> Daniel Brinton seems to have been the first to give the name 'trickster' to the baffling figure of North American Indian mythology and folklore who was a gross deceiver, a crude prankster, a creator of the earth, a shaper of culture, and a fool caught in his own lies. In any event, by the end of the nineteenth century, the term had become standard.... (6-7)[2]

As we can see in the above definition, the trickster combines a number of characteristics into one figure including characteristics that many may view as contradictory. From this standpoint, the use of the

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trickster designation seems to be an attempt to categorize a figure that ruptures the binary divisions frequently found in Western thought. Pelton describes the trickster as problematic for Western thought stating:

> The chief problem, as Mac Linscott Ricketts saw very clearly in his important survey of the attempts to understand the North American Indian trickster, was to penetrate the 'kind of logic [that] combines all these disparate elements into one mythical personality.' (7)[3]

The previous overview of the trickster category leaves us with some important questions. Ricketts states that the trickster combines disparate elements into one mythical personality. However, as discussed previously, if specific traits of the trickster are not universal but instead culturally relative, then we must consider how the characteristics of a specific "trickster" in question are viewed within its own culture. Does the culture in question view the characteristics of the "trickster" as disparate or is the fusion of these traits only confusing and contradictory to those "on the outside looking in"? I believe that in the case of the novel *Changó*, trickster is a misnomer which does not adequately capture the complexity of the characters which Smart classifies in this manner.

Further complicating the use of the term trickster are the general definitions associated with the term. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* a trickster is, "a deceiver or a rogue" (1490). Rogue is defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as, "a dishonest or unprincipled person"; "a mischievous person..."; and as, "a stray irresponsible, or undisciplined person or thing" (1193). *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* provides similar definitions of the trickster: "one who tricks; a deceiver; a cheat; a tricker" (1950). It is clear through the previous definitions that the term trickster is closely associated with negative traits such as deceit and dishonesty. This being the case, how much room does this term really provide to capture the complexity and multifaceted nature of many of the literary figures which are currently being designated by that term?

Returning to Smart's definition of the trickster, if a trickster utilizes trickery to liberate the oppressed, then it is important for us to define trickery. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* trickery is, "the practice or an instance of deception" or "the use of tricks" (1490). A trick, according to the same dictionary is, "an action or scheme undertaken to fool, outwit, or deceive," but may also be, "a feat of skill or dexterity" (1490). Based on these definitions as well as the previous discussion of the trickster I suggest that Smart's categorization of various of the novel's characters conflicts with the African principles on which the novel is based.

Smart's discussion of the trickster centers around the novel's title character Shango.[4] Smart views the title of the novel itself, *Changó, el gran putas* as the first example of the presence of the trickster in the novel, as he equates the term "putas" with "trickster." The phrase "el putas" is used primarily in Colombia. Dictionaries such as *Del español hablado en Colombia* and the *Nuevo diccionario de colombianismos* define "el putas" as the devil. In "Conversación con el Doctor Manuel Zapata Olivella, Bogotá, 1980; 1983," an interview of Zapata Olivella conducted by Yvonne Captain-Hidalgo, Zapata Olivella discusses his choice of the term "putas" for the title of his novel. Although he mentions the demonic connotations of the term, Zapata Olivella provides a much more complex definition of the phrase. The author states:

> ...en la realidad ese libro se llama así porque toda la obra ha sido concebida con esa connotación referida al personaje central, es la lucha del negro en este continente. Pues bien, parece que el vocablo 'putas' es universal en el habla castellana. También se lo aplica con la misma connotación en España. Se trata de un ente imaginario capaz de sobre ponerse a la muerte, a la adversidad, que puede asumir todas las formas malignas, que encarna el Demonio, pero a la par reunir en sí todas las formas nobles y bondadosas que se atribuyen a Dios.... Pues bien, yo creo que ésta es la palabra justa para aplicarse al pueblo negro, que ha podido sobrevivir de las cacerías en Africa, de las tremendas condiciones de miseria y de hambre a las cuales fue sometido durante la travesía y que pudo sobrevivir a todos los regímenes de esclavitud en este continente. No se dejó arrebatar en ningún momento su sonrisa. Por esto considero que el concepto de 'el Putas' es el más adecuado para el título de mi novela. (30)

As we can see in the previous statement, "el putas" can mean much more than simply the devil. "El putas" is an entity of tremendous strength, power and perseverance. Furthermore although this being is capable of embodying "negative" forms, it also possesses all of

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the positive traits attributed to God.

From the previous description of "el putas" which describes the figure as very powerful, one able to withstand all types of adversity, I offer as a possible synonym the term "chingón." "Chingón," as "el putas," has its negative connotations. The verb "chingar" means "to fuck", therefore chingón may be translated as "fucker." However the term is also used in a positive manner. According to the *Collins Spanish Dictionary*, "chingón" also means, "big shot, top man, boss" (215).

The association between "el putas" and "chingón" facilitates our discussion of English translations of the title. In the aforementioned interview by Captain-Hidalgo Zapata Olivella discusses the translating of the title to English and offers "Shango, the Holy Fucker" as his translation (30). His translation of "putas" as "fucker" supports my previous association of "el putas" with "chingón," for I have established that "chingón" may be translated as "fucker." After providing the translation of the title, Zapata Olivella explains his translation in the following manner:

> Yo sé que la palabra 'fucker' en inglés es una palabra desconsiderada aplicada a los individuos que tienen de las relaciones sexuales los conceptos y prácticas más viciosos, etc. Pero si le agrega la palabra, 'holy', 'sagrado,' entonces, prácticamente cualquiera que sea el 'fucker' tradicional pierde su connotación, o la debiera de perder, ¿no? Ahora yo creo que conlleva mucho del significado que tiene el vocablo castellano. La palabra 'fucker' en los Estados Unidos, jamás tiene un significado de mediocre. Sino se le da un sentido afirmativo. Con ese mismo criterio creo que se la puede utilizar. (30)

From the previous statements by Zapata Olivella it is clear that he is using the term "gran putas" in a positive and complimentary manner. He is aware of the negative connotations associated with "fucker", the most accurate translation of putas. He therefore pairs it with holy believing that this combination best gets across in English the meaning of "gran putas". From Zapata Olivella's description of "holy fucker" we can arrive at the conclusion that a "holy fucker" is much like a "chingón," it is a strong, powerful entity. The "gran putas" therefore, is a big shot, the top man, or in the case of Shango the top deity.

Smart translates the title of the novel to, 'Shango, the Baddest M[_____]-f[_____]', and then suggests that "mother fucker" is synonymous with "trickster".[5] In discussing how to translate the title of the novel Smart states:

> The most accurate, if neither the most elegant nor polite rendition, would be something like 'Shango, the Baddest M[_____]-f[_____].' A 'putas' is, then, a form of Trickster, and the great Shango, god of war, fertility and dance, is associated in the title exclusively with trickery. (24)

If we utilize the definitions of "baddest" and "mother fucker" used in what is frequently referred to as "black slang" or "African-American slang" in the United States, then Smart's translation is very much in line with the description of the title provided by Zapata Olivella. In the *Dictionary of Afro-American* Slang Clarence Major defines "bad" as, "a simple reversal of the white standard, the very best" (22). *In Black talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, Geneva Smitherman defines "mother-fucker" or "muthafucka" as it appears in her text in the following manner:

> Used to refer to a person, place, or thing, either negatively or positively, depending on the context. It never refers to a person who has sex with his/her mother. 'Now that's a bad muthafucka,' meaning, That's a beautiful car; 'Michael Jordan is a muthafucka on the court,' meaning, Michael Jordan's basketball-playing prowess is extraordinary.... (164)

Captain-Hidalgo also believes "mother-fucker" to be an accurate translation of "el putas." In *Culture of Fiction* she states that the term is "easily translatable" to mother-fucker (132). In her discussion of the book's title, Captain-Hidalgo uses former Black Panther Bobby Seale's definition of "mother-fucker" as a basis for her discussion of the title. She quotes the following statement made by Seale:

> Today, one can use the word to refer to a friend or someone he respects for doing things he never thought could be done by a black man.... Well, it's kind of a real complimentary statement to a brother or even a sister when one vicariously relates to someone who's black and pulls a fantastic feat. We will joyfully say, 'Man, he's a motherfucker.' (133)[6]

From the previously provided definitions of "baddest" and "mother-fucker" we can see that the title "*Shango,*

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the Baddest Mother-fucker" provided by Smart captures the essence of "Changó el gran putas" as expressed by Zapata Olivella. Shango in being "the baddest mother-fucker" is an entity without parallel. He is the best of the best, the most exceptional of the exceptional, and not one to be messed with.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon states that colonized people are judged, in large part, by their ability to adopt the dominant culture's language. He gives the example of the Antilles stating, "The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language" (18). He later states that the idea that colonized people are judged in proportion to their mastery of the dominant culture's language is not exclusive to the Antilles, and may be generalized to include all colonized people. With this idea in mind, I believe that we can view Zapata Olivella's use of "el gran putas" as a tool to combat the mental colonization described by Fanon. In the introduction to the Dictionary of Afro-American Slang, Major states that, "Black slang stems... from a... rejection of the life-styles, social patterns, and thinking in general of the Euro-American sensibility" (10). Major's statement may easily be applied to Zapata Olivella's use of "el gran putas." His use of that phrase to describe the African deity Shango, and furthermore as part of the title of his novel is demonstrative of his refusal to be controlled by eurocentric standards or definitions. Through this refusal to accept European standards as the only standards for language usage and culture Zapata Olivella validates the African perspective on which his novel is based.

Having defined "el gran putas", I now return to Smart's assertion that "el putas" is a trickster. Based on the previous definitions of "baddest mother-fucker"/"el gran putas," can the "baddest mother-fucker" be equated with the "trickster"? The question as to whether "baddest mother-fucker" and "trickster" are synonymous forces us to return to an earlier question: how does Smart define trickster? If Smart views the trickster as a deceitful figure that resorts to underhanded type tactics to achieve its goals, then I believe that "baddest mother-fucker" and "trickster" are not synonymous terms. If he views the trickster as a deceitful, untrustworthy figure, then the trickster categorization is not in line with the way "el putas" is used in the novel. If he bases his idea of the trickster on characteristics such as the ability to deceive, then to support his argument Smart must rely on the dominant culture's definition of "el putas" as the devil instead of the slang definition which is in use in the novel. As demonstrated earlier, nothing in the slang definitions provided presents a direct correlation between a "bad mother-fucker" and a trickster. A "bad mother-fucker," as defined in "Black English" terms, most often does not utilize deceit or dishonesty to achieve his/her status as a "bad mother-fucker." On the contrary, often it is for completely opposite reasons that he/she is given such status. Status of "bad mother-fucker" is most frequently given, as can be seen through the example of Michael Jordan in the definition of "mother-fucker" provided, because a person or entity has openly demonstrated exceptional skill or power, respected for having done something exceptional.

Hence, in the case of Shango, instead of being viewed as a trickster as suggested by Smart, I believe Shango is very well suited to the categorization of "bad mother-fucker" as implied by the title of the novel, due to his exceptional power. In the novel, it is Shango who condemns the bantu to slavery but, as Captain- Hidalgo notes, it is also Shango who will help guide the bantu to freedom: "from the Afrocentric vision Shango is the saving grace that will lead them out of bondage" (146).[7] This vision of Shango as a liberator is quite apparent through his connection to the deity Elegba.[8] In the novel Elegba, who guides most of the protagonists in their struggle for freedom, is Shango's messenger. Due to his exceptional abilities Captain-Hidalgo also prefers to view Shango as more than a trickster, stating: "Rather than merely a trickster... Shango... can also be described as the ultimate 'bad nigger' (motherfucker) so rooted in African-American cultures" (146).[9]

Returning to Zapata Olivella's discussion of the title of the novel, in his interview with Captain-Hidalgo he states that he used the phrase "el putas" not only for its meaning, but also to validate a popular expression which may be looked down upon in academic circles. Zapata Olivella states:

> Ahora, la palabra 'putas' en castellano no sólo se justifica en el contexto de la obra sino que es una manera también de recoger una expresión popular, dignificarla, llevarla a la condición literaria y mostrársela a aquellos escritores academistas, elitistas que consideran que a los libros hay que darles nombres de acuerdo con la tradición europea, que comparten la censura de la Academia o de los críticos del sistema de opresión en que viven nuestros pueblos. (30)

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For the same reasons as Zapata Olivella describes Shango as "el gran putas", I believe that we must be cautious in utilizing the term trickster. Zapata's description of Shango as "el gran putas" serves a dual purpose. First it elevates, it glorifies an African deity. Furthermore, by referring to Shango as "el gran putas," as "the baddest mother-fucker," he glorifies him in non-european terms. Instead he is glorified in African-American terms. Therefore, the classification of Shango as a trickster may become problematic because it has the potential to impose European standards on the figure of Shango, standards which conflict with the African and African-American perspectives of him. In the novel, Shango is not simply an entity which relies on trickery to achieve his goals, nor is he an evil deity that is cruel for the sake of being cruel. Shango is simply a powerful deity who acts in the manner he sees fit. When he believes that the bantu do not honor him sufficiently he condemns them to slavery. However, despite the condemnation, he makes it clear that they will regain their freedom. Shango simply stipulates that the bantu must work to regain their freedom, they must earn it. Therefore, I would not equate Shango's expectation that the bantu, along with his guidance, find a way to free themselves with trickery. The term trickster, because of the numerous negative connotations the term evokes, is inadequate to describe Shango. The use of the term reduces Shango to a deceitful deity who uses trickery to achieve his goals, which is not how Shango is presented in the novel. This reduction of Shango to a trickster in turn undermines the novel's attempt to validate African culture because it devalues the title character.

In her article, "Reading Trickster; or, Theoretical Reservation and a Seneca Tale," Karen Oakes questions the application of trickster theories to Native American literature. She believes that many trickster theories, in reference to Native American literature, frequently attempt to open a new discursive space for Native American literature but instead end up reserving a space for it, "within dominant Western theory" (148). I believe the same holds true for Smart's application of his trickster theory to *Changó*. While his intent is to validate the novel's African principles, through his use of the trickster categorization he places the novel within a Western discourse. Instead of attempting to fit Shango into Western categories we should simply accept him for what he is, "el gran putas."

Notes

[1]Smart quotes from Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, 2nd ed. Suffolk: Penguin, p.179.

[2]Pelton quotes Daniel Brinton from, *Myths of the New World*. Philadelphia: David McKay CO., 1868.

[3]Pelton quotes Mac Linscott Ricketts from, "The North American Indians." *History of Religions* 5 (1965): 327-50.

[4]Shango is the Yoruba orisha of war, dance and fertility. Orisha is the term used to refer to deities of the Yoruba religion. The Yoruba, according to Zapata Olivella in the glossary of his novel, are considered to be one of the most advanced cultures of ancient Africa. Yoruba people were based in and continue to inhabit what is now southwest Nigeria. Shango is the common English spelling of the deity's name, Changó, the common Spanish spelling.

[5]The title of the novel is written as it appears in Smart's article.

[6]Captain-Hidalgo quotes Bobby Seale from, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P Newton*. 1968. Reprint. New York: Vintage, 1970.

[7]Bantu is the plural of the term muntu. Muntu according to Zapata Olivella in the glossary to his novel, refers to human beings. However the term transcends the usual connotations of the term "human being" to include the living and dead, plants, animals and all other things useful to humans. It also alludes to a force which unites the past, present and future of human beings. In the novel people of African descent are frequently referred to as muntu or bantu.

[8]Elegba is the orisha which functions as a mediator between the living and the dead. Furthermore he is the link to communication with other orishas. It is through Elegba that communication with other deities is possible. Without his help it is impossible to communicate with other orishas.

[9]"Bad nigger" as defined by the *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* is, "a black person who refuses to be meek or who rejects the social terms of poverty and oppression the culture designs for him" (22).

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